ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 22

NEWSWEEK
3 JANUARY 1982

The Plot to Kill Pope John Paul II

In the dimly lit lobby of the Hotel Vitosha in Sofia, Bulgaria, groups of swarthy men cluster on leather couches beneath an eternal pall of cigarette smoke. They converse in a thicket of waving arms and a babble of languages—Bulgarian, Arabic, English, German, French. Inside the hotel's garish bar, sleek, well-groomed prostitutes ply their trade under a benevolent dispensation from the Bulgarian security police. The Vitosha was built by the Japanese in 1979, and it quickly became a hotbed of Balkan intrigue, a haven for spies, drug smugglers, arms dealers and terrorists in transit between Europe and Asia Minor. The most celebrated guest in the Vitosha's short and shady history was a hard-eyed young Turkish hit man named Mehmet Ali Agca. He spent about two months there in 1980. And it was in room 910 of the Hotel Vitosha that Agca claims he met with another Turk on the run, Bekir Celenk, who offered him $1.7 million to kill Pope John Paul II.

That is the crux of the story emerging from an Italian magistrate's painstaking investigation into the shooting of John Paul on May 13, 1981. Though the case remains unproven and much of the evidence is circumstantial, there is reason to believe that the Bulgarian secret police recruited Agca, through Turkish intermediaries, into the ranks of its hired guns, and that he was armed and supported by the Bulgarians when he shot the pope. "We have substantial evidence," Italian Justice Minister Clelio Darida told NEWSWEEK. "This isn't something we're inventing. Agca operated in close contact with the Bulgarians." That much seems clear, but did Bulgaria order Agca to shoot the pope? And was the Soviet KGB pulling Bulgaria's strings? If so, the trail may lead—ultimately and by all odds unprovably—to Yuri Andropov, the former secret-police chieftain who recently ascended to the leadership of the Soviet Union.

Despite heated denials from Moscow and Sofia, the Italians are convinced that the shooting of the pope was a deliberate plot, not a random act of madness. Agca, who was sentenced to life in prison for trying to kill the pope, began to sing a year ago. His word is hardly his bond. But on the basis of Agca's confession, Magistrate Ilario Martella, a careful and respected investigator, has begun to spread his net. So far, the Italians have arrested a Bulgarian airline official, accusing him of helping to plan and carry out the attack. And they have charged two minor Bulgarian diplomats and four Turks as accomplices. Last week the Italian government threw its weight behind the theory that Moscow wanted the outspoken John Paul killed to prevent him from interfering in Polish affairs. "Ali Agca's attack on the pope is to be considered as a real act of war in a time of peace, a precautionary and alternative solution to the invasion of Poland," Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio told Parliament. Though it wasn't saying so, the Vatican seemed to agree. "From the very beginning, [we were] absolutely convinced that the KGB was behind the plot," a high-ranking Vatican source told NEWSWEEK. "Now it turns out to be right."

Arms and Drugs: But why Bulgaria? "Why *not* Bulgaria?" responds Alessandro Pietromarchi, who has been in charge of the Italian Embassy in Sofia since his ambassador was recalled earlier this month. "Somebody obviously was stupid enough to try to kill the pope. Why shouldn't it have been Bulgaria?" In fact, Bulgaria is the most loyal of the Soviet satellites, and its secret service is as closely controlled by the KGB as any in Eastern Europe (page 27). Through an alliance with Turkish gangsters, the Bulgarians preside over a brisk international trade in arms and drugs, and they have a well-developed spy network in Italy. The Bulgarian secret service, the DS, has a reputation for ruthlessness; it specializes in what one senior Western intelligence agent calls "the rough end of the trade," and it is totally loyal to Moscow.

If Moscow is behind Agca and the Bulgarians, most Western governments probably would rather not know about it; the effects on arms control, trade and other East-West relations could be devastating. Perhaps for that reason, some in the West suggest that the link to Andropov could be disinformation spread by his foes overseas—or even inside the Kremlin. And some intelligence analysts note that the botched assassination attempt lacked the professionalism usually associated with Moscow's surrogate hit squads. For their part, the Russians are a picture of outraged innocence. "Bourgeois propaganda and right-wing newspapers are spreading slanderous fabrications aimed at casting a shadow on socialist countries, particularly Bulgaria and the Soviet Union," said Central Committee spokesman Leonid Zamyatin in one of a series of extraordinary Soviet comments on the case.

And yet, who else would want the pope dead? "You are working in a world of mirrors where anything is possible and where anyone could be involved," says Lord Bethell, a British specialist on the Soviet Union. "You have to ask who would stand to gain most from the assassination of the pope, and the answer must be in the Soviet empire. He's a rallying point for the people in Poland, in Lithuania, in Czechoslovakia who want to throw off the Soviet yoke, and so he does make an obvious target. Combine the motive with the fact that the Bulgarians have a proven record of assassination, and you have to say there is at least a circumstantial case against them."

A Huge Cast: There is another, simpler explanation, of course: that Mehmet Ali Agca was merely a solitary lunatic. Certainly he tried to give that impression right after he shot the pope. The 23-year-old Agca identified himself as a Palestinian, an Islamic fundamentalist and an opponent of both American and Soviet imperialism. He said he had gone to London to kill "the king," but changed his mind when he discovered that the king was a woman. Islamic gallantry, he said, did not prevent him from shooting the pope. "I acted alone, and no one helped me," he boasted to interrogators. In fact, Agca had help from a huge cast of Bulgarians, Turks and others in the terrorist underground. And all the evidence suggests that he is neither stupid nor crazy.

Agca was born in 1958 to a poor family in Yesiltepe, a shantytown near Malatya, a provincial capital in eastern Turkey. He did well in school, worked hard to support his family and was not particularly religious; his brother says he rarely went to the mosque. Agca suffered from a mild form of epilepsy, and in high school his imperious manner earned him the nickname Emperor. "Terrorist organizations in Turkey normally recruit semiretarded illiterates as their hit men," says a former Turkish official. "Agca did not belong to this category. He was a clever, brave and determined man. He was highly trained."

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The Gray Wolves: Eastern Turkey was a battleground for the left and right, and Agca fell in with extremists from both ends of the political spectrum. He developed links to the "Gray Wolves," the private terrorist army of the neo-Nazi National Action Party. He also became acquainted with a neighbor named Teslim Tore, who founded the Turkish People's Liberation Army, a Marxist terror group. After his arrest in Rome, Agca claimed that in 1977 Tore took him to a guerrilla camp in Lebanon for training by the pro-Soviet Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Turkish officials have never been able to confirm this story, but it is known that Tore took hundreds of young Turks to Lebanon for training.

Interestingly, the Turkish police have rounded up more than 40,000 terrorists over the years, and they never once found Agca's name on any membership list of the left or the right. Investigators now think that his involvement with the right-wing Gray Wolves may have been intended to provide him with Gray cover, but the same could be said for his involvement with the left. In any case, Agca went to extraordinary lengths to establish his fascist credentials. In 1979 he confessed to the murder of a respected left-wing Turkish editor named Abdi Ipekci. "I did it," Agca coolly told a press conference. "I killed Ipekci." Agca was locked up in the high-security Kartal-Maltepe prison, and suddenly he changed his tune. "I did not kill Ipekci, but I know who did," he said in the courtroom where he was standing trial. Was Agca sending a signal to his employers that they had better spring him from jail? A month later Agca escaped from the prison dressed in a soldier's uniform, passing through no fewer than eight locked doors. Presumably, large bribes had been paid, and eventually a captain and a dozen enlisted men were arrested as accomplices.

The day after his escape, Agca wrote a letter to Ipekci's newspaper threatening to kill the pope, who was scheduled to visit Turkey soon. In his letter, Agca denounced John Paul as "the Commander of the Crusades." That, of course, was long before the Solidarity movement in Poland posed a threat to Soviet domination in Eastern Europe; if Agca was advertising himself as a potential assassin of the Polish pope, the market for those services did not yet exist. Still, someone took him in hand, and the evidence points to Bulgaria and its friends in the Turkish underworld.

Damaging Trade: "Bulgaria has long played a major role in the Soviet program to destabilize Turkey through terrorism," asserts Paul Henze, a former U.S. official who worked for Jimmy Carter's National Security Council as an expert on Turkey and has since investigated Agca's background. "The Bulgarian state export firm Kintex was used as a channel for smuggling weapons to Turkish terrorists." In exchange, Turkish gangsters smuggle drugs through Bulgaria to markets in Western Europe. There is not much that Turkey can do to stop this damaging two-way trade. Bulgaria sits astride the most direct highway and rail routes between Turkey and Europe.

Two months after his escape from prison, Agca made his way east to the city of Erzurum, where he was sheltered by a right-wing university student. On the night of Feb. 1, 1980, Agca slipped across the frontier into Iran. He had no known contacts in Iran, and he spoke little Persian, so why did Agca go there? "A theoretical answer," says Henze, "is that he simply passed through Iran on his way to the Soviet Union." In any case Agca dropped out of sight until July 1980, when Omar Marsan, a 31-year-old Turk working for a Munich appliance firm, saw him in Sofia.

Passport: During his stay at the Hotel Vitosha, Agca must have come to the attention of the Bulgarian secret police, if they weren't well acquainted with him already. Marsan allegedly helped him obtain a forged Turkish passport, number 136635, in the name of Faruk Ozgun. The passport, which Agca took with him to Rome, contained a fake Turkish exit visa—and a genuine Bulgarian entry stamp. Marsan also introduced Agca to a mysterious Bulgarian known as Mustafa Eof. Later Agca claimed that Eof had nothing to do with the attack on the pope. But Francesco Mazzola, who was Italy's internal-security chief at the time, has suggested that "Mustafa Eof could well [have been] his contact, the man who would from time to time supply him with money, documentation, etc., and at the same time provide him with his instructions."

Marsan also put Agca in touch with Bekir Celenk, the Turk who allegedly set the $1.7 million price on John Paul's head—and who turned up in Sofia three weeks ago claiming he had nothing to do with the plot against the pope. Ostensibly a respectable businessman, Celenk is alleged to be boss of a large drug- and arms-smuggling operation in Turkey. He also is reported to have close links to the "godfather" of crime in Istanbul, Abuzar Ugurlu, who happens to own a luxurious villa in Sofia.

After his sojourn in the Hotel Vitosha, Agca disappeared into the Turkish underground in Western Europe, where thousands of "guest workers" have formed a labyrinthine community. At various times he was reported to be in West Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Spain and even Tunisia, and along the way he was helped by sympathizers of the Gray Wolves. But by some official estimates, Agca's grand tour cost $50,000 for transportation and hotel bills, a sum that seems to be well beyond the resources of the Gray Wolves themselves. Eventually, Agca registered as a student in Perugia, which entitled him to an extended, three-month Italian visa. Then he took up residence at a modest guesthouse in Rome, the Pensione Isa. One fine day in May 1981, he went to St. Peter's Square and fired the shots that wounded the pope and two bystanders in the crowd of tourists.

'Hidden Minds': Agca was quickly tried, convicted and sentenced to life in prison. The judges wrote that Agca was only the "tip of a conspiracy" that was "widespread and menacing and devised by shadowy forces." They said the shooting was "the result of a complex plot orchestrated by hidden minds interested in destabilization," but they stopped short of giving details and naming names. The evidence that has come to light recently suggests that Agca was paid and supported by Bulgarians. But did Agca know he was working for the Bulgarian secret police, or did he think he was in the employ of the Turkish underworld? And did the Bulgarians—or the Soviet KGB, for that matter—want him to shoot the pope?

Enter Ilario Martella. The 48-year-old investigator first made his mark in Italy's Lockheed scandal six years ago, and he has a reputation for honesty and precision. "He's a careful, responsible, cautious man," says a recently retired security expert. "He's the reverse of a publicity-mad mythomaniac. He would never advance anything he wasn't sure of. At the same time, he's fearless enough not to be overwhelmed by the international implications of his findings." Under Martella's prodding, Agca began to reveal new information a year ago, perhaps because, this time, no one had sprung him from jail.

Martella still has not made his evidence public, but reports have leaked to the feisty Italian press. Further light on the story was shed by terrorism specialist Claire Sterling, writing in the Reader's Digest, and by NBC News. According to a variety of reports, Agca said his escape from the Turkish prison had been arranged by Oral Celik, a Turkish terrorist who was last heard of in Bulgaria. Celik also is accused of purchasing the 9-mm Browning pistol that Agca used to shoot the pope. The pistol actually was given to him by another Turk, Omar Bagci, who later was arrested in Switzerland and extradited to Italy. The key link between the Turks and Bulgarians seems to have been Bekir Celenk, who allegedly offered Agca a fortune to kill the pope. Later, he is said to have performed another service, introducing Agca to Sergei Ivanov Antonov, the Bulgarian airline official, and to Bulgarian Embassy employees Todor Ayvazov and Zhelyu Kolev Vassilev.

Alibi: The three Bulgarians are unimpressive men. Ayvazov, who fled back to Bulgaria, was a cashier at the embassy in Rome. Vassilev, who also returned home one step ahead of the Italian law, was secretary to the Bulgarian military attaché. Antonov, the only Bulgarian to be arrested so far, appeared to be a simple airline clerk; he left

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school at 16 for two years of military service before joining Balkan Airlines. His lawyer says Antonov has an alibi for the day the pope was shot and for the two days before that. At one point he was working as a backup telephone operator for the embassy, and the night before the shooting, he served as doorkeeper at a reception. Still, Western intelligence sources identified Antonov as a Bulgarian spy. When Martella brought Antonov and Agca together in a prison meeting room, he asked the Bulgarian, "Do you know this man?" Antonov replied, "No." Then Martella asked Agca, "Is this the man you identified from a photograph?" Agca answered, "Yes, I think so."

According to press reports, Agca had five phone numbers in his pocket when he was arrested. Two were for the Bulgarian Embassy, one was for the Bulgarian Consulate, another was for the Balkan Airlines office and the last was Ayvazov's unlisted home phone number. Later, Agca accurately described Ayvazov's apartment in detail and said the plot was hatched there. He claimed that on May 11 and 12, the days just before the shooting, he went to St. Peter's Square with Antonov and Ayvazov to pick the best spot from which to shoot.

On the day of the attack, according to this account of Agca's confession, he met Antonov and Ayvazov in the Piazza della Repubblica (map, page 24). They went back to Ayvazov's apartment, where the Bulgarians picked up at least one pistol and a bomb they would use "to arouse panic." The three men allegedly drove together to St. Peter's in an Alfa Romeo. After the shooting they planned to meet outside the Canadian Embassy on the Via della Conciliazione, the main street leading away from Vatican City.

Ever since the shooting of the pope, there has been speculation that Agca had one or two accomplices in St. Peter's Square. So far there has been no resolution of that mystery. One man who was photographed running away from the scene was thought to be Gray Wolves sympathizer Omar Ay, who now is back home in Turkey facing a political-murder charge. Agca reportedly described Ay as a tourist, and Martella is said to be unconvinced that Ay had any role in the plot; even now, the magistrate has not issued an arrest warrant for Ay.

Other intriguing evidence of a Bulgarian connection has turned up in a separate terrorism case, the kidnapping last year of U.S. Brig. Gen. James Dozier. Defense Minister Lagorio said last week that Italian "counterintelligence has been monitoring every radio transmission by the Bulgarian secret services for some time." He reported two periods of "unusual traffic": one at the time of the papal shooting, the other during the six weeks that Dozier was held before his rescue. When Dozier's kidnappers, members of the leftist Red Brigades, were standing trial, one of their leaders said Bulgaria had offered money and other support for the kidnapping in order to "destabilize Italy." The offer was passed along by Luigi Scricciolo, a high-ranking official of the Socialist-backed Unione Italiana del Lavoro, who reportedly has confessed to having contacts with Bulgarian agents.

Scricciolo has been accused of several offenses: complicity in the Dozier kidnapping, political and military espionage, terrorism and spying on international labor leaders. One of those leaders was Solidarity's Lech Walesa, who visited Rome early last year to meet the pope and was escorted around town by Scricciolo.

Italian investigators claim to have uncovered a whole range of illicit Bulgarian activities in their country. Last month police in the northern city of Trento arrested 100 people on charges of smuggling arms and drugs through Western Europe. And last week they brought the Bulgarian connection full circle by issuing an arrest warrant in the arms and drugs case for the ubiquitous Bekir Celenk, alleged paymaster of the papal plot and now a guest of the Bulgarian government.

'Scholarship': Despite all the evidence, it is hard to believe that Bulgaria would inspire anything as provocative—even downright stupid—as an attack on the pope. "The trouble with the Bulgarian theory is that the plot was so . . . so *unprofessional*," sputters a diplomat whose own country has been a target for terrorists. "After Agca was caught, the Bulgarians shouldn't have left Antonov in the country for even 15 minutes, but a year and a half later, he's still selling tickets in Rome." Even strong proponents of the conspiracy theory can't explain why the Bulgarians allowed themselves to become directly involved in planning and carrying out the attack. They can't explain why the Bulgarians left Antonov in place—and why Agca wasn't murdered right after he pulled the trigger.

Although Agca apparently was paid, armed and directed by the Bulgarians for months, the decision to shoot the pope may have been entirely his own. "It is possible the Bulgarians had given Agca and [other fugitive terrorists] a 'scholarship' to keep them available," says a West German source. "Agca and others may then have advanced the assassination plot on their own and surprised the Bulgarians." Another theory is that some middle-level Bulgarian official may have hatched the plot without official sanction. "All intelligence services come up with harebrained schemes; you remember the various CIA plans to kill Castro," says John Erickson, professor of history at Edinburgh University and a leading authority on the Soviet-bloc works, it's the Order of Lenin and vodka all round, and if it doesn't, you deny you had anything to do with it."

Such doubts may never be laid to rest, but Italian officials are convinced that they can make the Bulgarian connection stand up. A courtroom test, however, is unlikely just now. "It will be at least another year before Italy has the case ready enough to prosecute the people we have arrested," Justice Minister Darida told NEWSWEEK. Meanwhile, Bulgaria is complaining bitterly and is taking out its wrath on two Italian citizens. Paolo Farsetti, 34, and Gabriella Trevisin, 26, were put on trial in Sofia last week for allegedly photographing Bulgarian military sites last summer. A Bulgarian official offered, in effect, to swap them for Sergei Antonov, but the Italians turned down the deal.

No one will ever establish, one way or another, whether Yuri Andropov and the KGB were involved. It is difficult to believe that the Soviets would expect the murder of the pope to solve their Polish problem. To some, it seems odd that the Soviets would put their fate in the hands of Bulgarians and Turks, depriving themselves of the control that is so essential to a ticklish intelligence operation. And some analysts find it simply inconceivable that the Soviet leadership would deliberately embark on a policy of killing other world leaders.

Still, on at least a hypothetical plane, the possibility of Soviet involvement is hard to dismiss out of hand. The Soviets always have had ample control over the Bulgarian secret service, and the use of Bulgarian and Turkish intermediaries would have given them the deniability that is just as important as control. "The Bulgars will carry the can," says a leading British intelligence specialist who is inclined to believe the theory. "The Russians will make sure there is no blowback to them, whatever happens."

Symbol: Whether or not the Soviets planned the attack on the pope, they were its principal beneficiaries. "Many people believe the whole development of Solidarity in Poland was the result of the pope's election," says Harvard historian Richard Pipes, who recently left his post as chief Kremlinologist for the National Security Council. "He was the symbol of Polish Roman Catholicism and Polish nationhood. He embodies the very spirit of Poland, exactly the spirit Moscow wanted to crush." In fact, the assassination attempt and the serious wound it caused have sapped the pope's spirit. "It has left him weak, subject to intense fatigue," says a source in the Vatican's Secretariat of State. "It has shortened his life expectancy and made him lose

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his fire. He is a different person since May 13."

What if Andropov *did* order or condone the shooting? Some people think that proof might do more harm than good. Western governments would have to respond in some fashion, jeopardizing their political and economic relations with the secret-police chief who is now ensconced in the Kremlin. Some Catholic leaders worry that the Soviet bloc would respond by cracking down harder on their church. "We want justice to be done, but we don't want to unnecessarily hurt relations with the East," says a Vatican source close to the pope. But the search for the men who planned John Paul's murder leads through a wilderness of mirrors, and the trail will never be traced conclusively. The plot against the pope is not a detective story with a tidy ending. It is a cautionary tale about the perils of an increasingly dangerous world.

RUSSELL WATSON with ELAINE SCIOLINO and CAROLYN FRIDAY in Rome, DAVID C. MARTIN in Washington, ZOFIA SMARDZ in Sofia and bureau reports